

# EXPERIMENT<sup>1</sup>

By MAXWELL STRUTHERS BURT

(From *The Pictorial Review*)

WHEN she had reached that point of detachment where she could regard the matter more or less objectively, Mrs. Ennis, recalling memories of an interrupted but lifelong friendship, realized that Burnaby's behavior, outrageous or justifiable or whatever you choose to call it, at all events aberrational, was exactly what might have been expected of him, given an occasion when his instincts for liking or disliking had been sufficiently aroused. Moreover, there was about him always, she remembered, this additional exceptional quality: the rare and fortunate knowledge that socially he was independent; was not, that is, subject to retaliation. He led too roving a life to be moved by the threat of unpopularity; a grandfather had bequeathed him a small but unshakable inheritance.

As much, therefore, as any one can be in this world he was a free agent; and the assurance of this makes a man very brave for either kindness or unkindness, and, of course, extremely dangerous for either good or evil. You will see, after a while, what I am driving at. Meanwhile, without further comment, we can come directly to Mrs. Ennis, where she sat in her drawing room, and to the night on which the incident occurred.

Mrs. Ennis, small and blond, and in a white evening gown of satin and silver sequins that made her look like a lovely and fashionable mermaid, sat in her drawing room and stretched her feet out to the flames of a gentle wood-

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, 1921, by The Pictorial Review Company.

Copyright, 1921, by Charles Scribner's Sons. From "Chance Encounters."

fire. It was seven o'clock of a late April night, and through an open window to her left came, from the little park beyond the house, a faint breeze that stirred lazily the curtains and brought to the jonquils, scattered about in numerous metal and crystal bowls, word of their brothers in the dusk without. The room was quiet, save for the hissing of the logs; remote, delicately lighted, filled with the subtle odor of books and flowers; reminiscent of the suave personalities of those who frequented it. On the diminutive piano in one corner, a large silver frame, holding the photograph of a man in French uniform, caught here and there on its surface high lights from the shaded wall-lamp above. In the shelter of white bookcases, the backs of volumes in red and tawny and brown gave the effect of tapestry cunningly woven. Mrs. Ennis stared at the logs and smiled.

It was an odd smile, reflective, yet anticipatory; amused, absent-minded, barely disturbing the lines of her beautifully modeled red lips. Had any of Mrs. Ennis's enemies, and they were not few in number, seen it, they would have surmised mischief afoot; had any of her friends, and there were even more of these than enemies, been present, they would have been on the alert for events of interest. It all depended, you see, upon whether you considered a taste for amateur psychology, indulged in, a wickedness or not. Mrs. Ennis herself would not have given her favorite amusement so stately a name; she was aware merely that she found herself possessed of a great curiosity concerning people, particularly those of forcible and widely different characteristics, and that she liked, whenever possible, to gather them together, and then see what would happen. Usually something did — happen, that is.

With the innocence of a child playing with fire-crackers (and it wasn't altogether innocent, either), in her rôle of the god in the machine she had been responsible for many things; several comedies, perhaps a tragedy or two. Ordinarily her parties were dull enough; complacent Washington parties; diplomats, long-haired Senators from the West, short-bearded Senators from

the East, sleek young men and women, all of whom sat about discussing grave nonsense concerning a country with which they had utterly lost touch, if ever they had had any; but every now and then, out of the incalculable shufflings of fate, appeared a combination that seemed to offer more excitement. Tonight such a combination was at hand. Mrs. Ennis was contented, in the manner of a blithe and beautiful spider.

Burnaby, undoubtedly, was the principal source of this contentment, for he was a young man — he wasn't really young, but you always thought of him as young — of infinite potentialities; Burnaby, just back from some esoteric work in Roumania, whither he had gone after the War, and in Washington for the night and greatly pleased to accept an invitation for dinner; but essential as he was, Burnaby was only part of the tableau arranged. To meet him, Mrs. Ennis had asked her best, for the time being, friend, Mimi de Rochefort — Mary was her right name — and Mimi de Rochefort's best, for the time being, friend, Robert Pollen. Nowadays Pollen came when Madame de Rochefort came; one expected his presence. He had been a habit in this respect for over six months; in fact, almost from the time Madame de Rochefort (she was so young that to call her Madame seemed absurdly quaint), married these five years to a Frenchman, had set foot once more upon her native land.

In the meeting of Pollen and Burnaby and Mary Rochefort, Mrs. Ennis foresaw contingencies; just what these contingencies were likely to be she did not know, but that an excellent chance for them existed she had no doubt, even if in the end they proved to be no more than the humor to be extracted from the reflection that a supposedly rational divinity had spent his time creating three people so utterly unlike.

The gilt clock on the mantelpiece chimed half-past seven. The jonquils on the piano shone in the polished mahogany like yellow water-lilies in a pool. Into the silence of the room penetrated, on noiseless feet, a fresh-colored man servant. Despite such days as the present, Mrs. Ennis had a way, irritating to her acquaintances,

of obtaining faithful attendance. Even servants seemed to be glad to wait upon her. Her husband, dead these six years, had been unfailingly precise in all matters save the one of drink.

"Mr. Burnaby!" announced the man servant.

Burnaby strode close on his heels. Mrs. Ennis had arisen and was standing with her back to the fireplace. She had the impression that a current of air followed the entrance of the two men. She remembered now that she had always felt that way with Burnaby; she had always felt as if he were bringing news of pine forests and big empty countries she had never seen but could dimly imagine. It was very exciting.

Burnaby paused and looked about the room doubtfully, then he chuckled and came forward. "I haven't seen anything like this for three years," he said. "Roumanian palaces are furnished in the very latest bad taste."

He took Mrs. Ennis's outstretched hand and peered down at her with narrowed eyelids. She received the further impression, an impression she had almost forgotten in the intervening years, of height and leanness, of dark eyes, and dark, crisp hair; a vibrant impression; something like a chord of music struck sharply. Unconsciously she let her hand rest in his for a moment, then she drew it away hastily. He was smiling and talking to her.

"Rhoda! You ought to begin to look a bit older! You're thirty-six, if you're a day! How do you do it? You look like a wise and rather naughty little girl."

"Hush!" said Mrs. Ennis. "I wear my hair parted on one side like a debutante to give me a head-start on all the knowing and subtle and wicked people I have to put up with. While they are trying to break the ice with an ingenue, I'm sizing them up."

Burnaby laughed. "Well, I'm not subtle," he said. He sank down into a big chair across the fireplace from her. "I'm only awfully glad to be back; and I'm good and simple and amenable, and willing to do nearly anything any good American tells me to do. I love Americans."

"You won't for very long," Mrs. Ennis assured him



dryly. "Particularly if you stay in Washington more than a day." She was wondering how even for a moment she had been able to forget Burnaby's vividness.

"No," laughed Burnaby, "I suppose not. But while the mood is on me, don't disillusion me."

Mrs. Ennis looked across at him with a smile. "You'll meet two very attractive people tonight, anyway," she said.

"Oh, yes!" He leaned forward. "I had forgotten — who are they?"

Mrs. Ennis spread her arms out along the chair. "There's Mary Rochefort," she answered; "and there's Robert Pollen, who's supposed to be the most alluring man alive."

"Is it doing him any good?"

"Well —" Mrs. Ennis looked up with a laugh.

"You don't like him? Or perhaps you do?"

Mrs. Ennis knit her brows in thought, her blue eyes dark with conjecture. "I don't know," she said at length. "Sometimes I think I do, and sometimes I think I don't. He's very good-looking in a tall, blond, pliable way, and he can be very amusing when he wants to be. I don't know."

"Why not?"

Mrs. Ennis wrinkled her nose in the manner of one who is being pushed to explanation.

"I am not so sure," she confided, "that I admire professional philanderers as much as I did. Although, so long as they leave me alone ——"

"Oh, he's that, is he?"

Mrs. Ennis corrected herself hastily. "Oh, no," she protested. "I shouldn't talk that way, should I? Now you'll have an initial prejudice, and that isn't fair — only —" she hesitated "I rather wish he would confine his talents to his own equals and not conjure young married women at their most vulnerable period."

"Which is?"

"Just when," said Mrs. Ennis, "they're not sure whether they want to fall in love again with their own husbands or not." Then she stopped abruptly. She was surprised that she had told Burnaby these things; even

more surprised at the growing incisiveness of her voice. She was not accustomed to taking the amatory excursions of her friends too much to heart; she had a theory that it was none of her business, that perhaps some day she might want charity herself. But now she found herself perceptibly indignant. She wondered if it wasn't Burnaby's presence that was making her so. Sitting across from her, he made her think of directness and dependability and other traits she was accustomed to refer to as "primitive virtues." She liked his black, heavily ribbed evening stockings. Somehow they were like him. It made her angry with herself and with Burnaby that she should feel this way; be so moved by "primitive virtues." She detested puritanism greatly, and righteously, but so much so that she frequently mistook the most innocent fastidiousness for an unforgivable rigidity. "If they once do," she concluded, "once do fall in love with their husbands again, they're safe, you know, for all time."

She looked up and drew in her breath sharply. Burnaby was sitting forward in his chair, staring at her with the curious, far-sighted stare she remembered was characteristic of him when his interest was suddenly and thoroughly aroused. It was as if he were looking through the person to whom he was talking to some horizon beyond. It was a trifle uncanny, unless you were accustomed to the trick.

"What's the matter?" she asked. She had the feeling that back of her some one she could not see was standing.

Burnaby smiled. "Nothing," he said. He sank back into his chair. "That's an odd name — the name of this alluring fellow of yours, isn't it? What did you say it was — Pollen?"

"Yes. Robert Pollen. Why, do you know him?"

"No." Burnaby shook his head. He leaned over and lit a cigarette. "You don't mind, do you?" he asked. He raised his eyes. "So he's conjuring this Madame de Rochefort, is he?" he concluded.

Mrs. Ennis flushed. "I never said anything of the kind!" she protested. "It's none of our business, anyway."

Burnaby smiled calmly. "I quite agree with you," he said. "I imagine that a Frenchwoman, married for a while, is much better able to conduct her life in this respect than even the most experienced of us."

"She isn't French," said Mrs. Ennis; "she's American. And she's only been married five years. She's just a child — twenty-six."

"Oh!" ejaculated Burnaby. "One of those hard-faced children! I understand — Newport, Palm Beach, cocktails —"

His voice was cut across by Mrs. Ennis's indignant retort. "You don't in the least!" she said. "She's not one of those hard-faced children; she's lovely — and I've come to the conclusion that she's pathetic. I'm beginning to rather hate this man Pollen. Back of it all are subtleties of personality difficult to fathom. You should know Blais Rochefort. I imagine a woman going about things the wrong way could break her heart on him like waves on a crystal rock. I think it has been a question of fire meeting crystal, and, when it finds that the crystal is difficult to warm, turning back upon itself. I said waves, didn't I? Well, I don't care if my metaphors are mixed. It's tragic, anyhow. And the principal tragedy is that Blais Rochefort isn't really cold — at least, I don't think he would be if properly approached — he is merely beautifully lucid and intelligent and exacting in a way no American understands, least of all a petted girl who has no family and who is very rich. He expects, you see, an equal lucidity from his wife. He's not to be won over by the fumbling and rather selfish and pretty little tricks that are all most of us know. But Mary, I think, would have learned if she had only held on. Now, I'm afraid, she's losing heart. Hard-faced child!" Mrs. Ennis grew indignant again. "Be careful my friend; even you might find her dangerously pathetic."

Burnaby's eyes were placidly amused. "Thanks," he observed. "You've told me all I wanted to know."

Mrs. Ennis waved toward the piano. "There's Blais Rochefort's photograph," she retorted in tones of good-humored exasperation. "Go over and look at it."

"I will."

Burnaby's black shoulders, bent above the photograph, were for a moment the object of a pensive regard. Mrs. Ennis sighed. "Your presence makes me puritanical," she observed. "I have always felt that the best way for any one to get over Pollens was to go through with them and forget them."

Burnaby spoke without turning his head.

"He's good-looking."

"Very."

"A real man."

"Decidedly! Very brave and very cultivated."

"He waxes his mustache."

"Yes, even brave men do that occasionally."

"I should think," said Burnaby thoughtfully, putting the photograph down, "that he might be worth a woman's hanging on to."

Mrs. Ennis got up, crossed over to the piano, and leaned an elbow upon it, resting her cheek in the palm of her upturned hand and smiling at Burnaby.

"Don't let's be so serious," she said. "What business is it of ours?" She turned her head away and began to play with the petals of a near-by jonquil. "Spring is a restless time, isn't it?"

It seemed to her that the most curious little silence followed this speech of hers, and yet she knew that in actual time it was nothing, and felt that it existed probably only in her own heart. She heard the clock on the mantelpiece across the room ticking; far off, the rattle of a taxicab. The air coming through the open window bore the damp, stirring smell of early grass.

"Madame De Rochefort and Mr. Pollen!" announced a voice.

Mrs. Ennis had once said that her young friend, Mimi de Rochefort, responded to night more brilliantly than almost any other woman she knew. The description was apt. Possibly by day there was a pallor too lifeless, a nose a trifle too short and arrogant, lips, possibly, too full; but by night these discrepancies blended into something very near perfection, and back of them as well was



a delicate illumination as of lanterns hung in trees beneath stars; an illumination due to youth, and to very large dark eyes, and to dark, soft hair and red lips. Nor with this beauty went any of the coolness or abrupt languor with which the modern young hide their eagerness.

Mary Rochefort was quite simple beneath her habitual reserve; frank and appealing and even humorous at times, as if startled out of her usual mood of reflective quiet by some bit of wit, slowly apprehended, too good to be overlooked. Mrs. Ennis watched with a sidelong glance the effect of her entrance upon Burnaby. Madame de Rochefort! How absurd! To call this white, tall, slim child madame! She admired rather enviously the gown of shimmering dark blue, the impeccability of adolescence. Over the girl's white shoulder, too much displayed, Pollen peered at Burnaby with the vague, hostile smile of the guest not yet introduced to a guest of similar sex.

"Late as usual!" he announced. "Mimi kept me!" His manner was subtly domestic.

"You're really on the stroke of the clock," said Mrs. Ennis. "Madame de Rochefort — Mr. Burnaby — Mr. Pollen." She laughed abruptly, as if a thought had just occurred to her. "Mr. Burnaby," she explained to the girl, "is the last surviving specimen of the American male — he has all the ancient national virtues. Preserved, I suppose, because he spends most of his time in Alaska, or wherever it is. I particularly wanted you to meet him."

Burnaby flushed and laughed uncertainly. "I object —" he began.

The fresh-colored man servant entered with a tray of cocktails. Madame de Rochefort exclaimed delightedly. "I'm so glad," she said. "Nowadays one fatigues oneself before dinner by wondering whether there will be anything to drink or not. How absurd!" The careful choice of words, the precision of the young, worldly voice were in amusing contrast to the youthfulness of appearance. Standing before the fireplace in her blue gown, she resembled a tapering lily growing from the indigo shadows of a noon orchard.

"Rhoda'll have cocktails when there aren't any more left in the country," said Pollen. "Trust Rhoda!"

Mary Rochefort laughed. "I always do," she said, "with reservations." She turned to Burnaby. "Where are you just back from?" she asked. "I understand you are always just back from some place, or on the verge of going."

"Usually on the verge," answered Burnaby. He looked at her deliberately, a smile in his dark eyes; then he looked at Pollen.

"Where were you — the War?"

"Yes — by way of Roumania in the end."

"The War!" Mary Rochefort's lips became petulant. One noticed for the first time the possibility of considerable petulance back of the shining self-control. "How sick of it I grew — all of us living over there! I'd like to sleep for a thousand years in a field filled with daf-fodils."

"They've plenty scattered about this room," observed Pollen. "Why don't you start now?"

The fresh-colored man servant announced dinner. "Shall we go down?" said Mrs. Ennis.

They left the little drawing-room, with its jonquils and warm shadows, and went along a short hall, and then down three steps and across a landing to the dining-room beyond. It, like the drawing-room, was small, white-paneled to the ceiling, with a few rich prints of Constable landscapes on the walls, and velvet-dark sideboards and tables that caught the light of the candles. In the center was a table of snowy drapery and silver and red roses.

Mrs. Ennis sank into her chair and looked about her with content. She loved small dinners beautifully thought out, and even more she loved them when, as on this night, they were composed of people who interested her. She stole a glance at Burnaby. How clean and brown and alert he was! The white table-cloth accentuated his look of fitness and muscular control. What an amusing contrast he presented to the rather languid, gesturing Pollen, who sat opposite him! And yet Pollen was con-

siderable of a man in his own way; very conquering in the affairs of life; immensely clever in his profession of architecture. Famous, Mrs. Ennis had heard.

But Mrs. Ennis, despite her feminine approval of success, couldn't imagine herself being as much interested in him — dangerously interested — as she knew her friend Mary Rochefort to be. How odd! From all the world to pick out a tall, blond, willowy man like Pollen! On the verge of middle age, too! Perhaps it was this very willowness, this apparent placidity that made him attractive. This child, Mary Rochefort, quite alone in the world, largely untrained, adrift, imperiously demanding from an imperious husband something to which she had not as yet found the key, might very naturally gravitate toward any one presenting Pollen's appearance of security; his attitude of complacency in the face of feminine authority. But was he complacent? Mrs. Ennis had her doubts. He was very vain; underneath his urbanity there might be an elastic hardness.

There were, moreover, at times indications of a rather contemptuous attitude toward a world less highly trained than himself. She turned to Pollen, trying to recollect what for the last few moments he had been saying to her. He perceived her more scrutinizing attention and faced toward her. From under lowered eyelids he had been watching, with a moody furtiveness, Mary Rochefort and Burnaby, who were oblivious to the other two in the manner of people who are glad they have met.

Mrs. Ennis found herself annoyed, her sense of good manners shocked. She had not suspected that Pollen could be guilty of such clumsiness; she questioned if matters had reached a point where such an attitude on his part would be justifiable under any circumstances. At all events, her doubts concerning his complacency had been answered. It occurred to Mrs. Ennis that her dinner-party was composed of more inflammable material, presented more dramatic possibilities, than even she had divined. She embraced Pollen with her smile.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" she asked.

He lifted long eyebrows and smiled faintly.

"Working very hard," he said.

"Building behemoths for billionaires?"

"Yes."

"And the rest of the time?"

"Rather drearily going about."

She surveyed him with wicked innocence.

"Why don't you fall in love?" she suggested.

His expression remained unmoved. "It is so difficult," he retorted, "to find the proper subject. A man of my experience frightens the inexperienced: the experienced frighten me."

"You mean ——?"

"That I have reached the age where the innocence no longer possible to me seems the only thing worth while."

Mrs. Ennis wrinkled her nose daintily. "Nonsense!" she observed, and helped herself to the dish the servant was holding out to her. "What you have said," she resumed, "is the last word of the sentimentalist. If I thought you really meant it, I would know at once that you were very cold and very cruel and rather silly."

"Thanks!"

"Oh, I'm talking more or less abstractly."

"Well, possibly I am all of those things."

"But you want me to be personal?"

Pollen laughed. "Of course! Doesn't everybody want *you* to be personal?"

For an instant Mrs. Ennis looked again at Burnaby and Mary Rochefort, and a slightly rueful smile stirred in her eyes. It was amusing that she, who detested large dinners and adored general conversation, should at the moment be so engrossed in preventing the very type of conversation she preferred. She returned to Pollen. What a horrid man he really was! Unangled and amorphous, and underneath, cold! He had a way of framing the woman to whom he was talking and then stepping back out of the picture. One felt like a model in all manner of dress and undress. She laughed softly. "Don't," she begged, "be so mysterious about yourself! Tell me ——" she held him with eyes of ingratiating sapphire —



"I've always been interested in finding out just what you are, anyway."

Far back in Pollen's own eyes of golden brown a little spark slowly burst into flame. It was exactly as if a gnome had lighted a lantern at the back of an unknown cave. Mrs. Ennis inwardly shuddered, but outwardly was gay.

How interminably men talked when once they were launched upon that favorite topic, themselves! Pollen showed every indication of reaching a point of intellectual intoxication where his voice would become antiphonal. His objective self was taking turns in standing off and admiring his subjective self. Mrs. Ennis wondered at her own kindness of heart. Why did she permit herself to suffer so for her friends; in the present instance, a friend who would probably — rather the contrary — by no means thank her for her pains? She wanted to talk to Burnaby. She was missing most of his visit. She wanted to talk to Burnaby so greatly that the thought made her cheeks burn faintly. She began to hate Pollen. Mary Rochefort's cool, young voice broke the spell.

"You told me," she said accusingly, "that this man — this Mr. Burnaby, has all the primitive virtues; he is the wickedest man I have ever met."

"Good gracious!" said Mrs. Ennis.

"The very wickedest!"

Pollen's mouth twisted under his mustache. "I wouldn't have suspected it," he observed, surveying Burnaby with ironic amusement. There was just a hint of hidden condescension in his voice.

Burnaby's eyes drifted past him with a look of quiet speculation in their depths, before he smiled at Mrs. Ennis.

"Roumania has changed you," she exclaimed.

He chuckled. "Not in the least! I was simply trying to prove to Madame de Rochefort that hot-bloodedness, coolly conceived, is the only possible road to success. Like most innately moral people, she believes just the opposite — in cool-bloodedness, hotly conceived."

"I moral?" said Mary Rochefort, as if the thought had not occurred to her before.

"Why, of course," said Burnaby. "It's a question of attitude, not of actual performance. The most moral man I ever knew was a habitual drunkard. His life was spent between debauch and disgust. Not, of course, that I am implying that with you——"

"Tell us what you meant in the first place," commanded Mrs. Ennis.

"Something," said Burnaby slowly, "totally un-American—in short, whole-heartedness." He clasped his sinewy, brown hands on the table-cloth. "I mean," he continued, "if, after due thought—never forget the due thought—you believe it to be the best thing to do to elope with another man's wife, elope; only don't look back. In the same way, if you decide to become, after much question, an ironmonger, be an ironmonger. Love passionately what you've chosen. In other words, life's like fox-hunting; choose your line, choose it slowly and carefully, then follow it 'hell-for-leather.'"

"You see, the trouble with Americans is that they are the greatest wanters of cake after they've eaten it the world has ever seen. Our blood isn't half as mixed as our point of view. We want to be good and we want to be bad; we want to be a dozen utterly incompatible things all at the same time. Of course, all human beings are that way, but other human beings make their choices and then try to eradicate the incompatibilities. The only whole-hearted people we possess are our business men, and even they, once they succeed, usually spoil the picture by astounding open scandals with chorus-girls."

Mrs. Ennis shook her head with amused bewilderment. "Do you mean," she asked, "that a man or woman can have only one thing in his or her life?"

"Only one very outwardly important thing—publicly," retorted Burnaby. "You may be a very great banker with a very great background as a husband, but you can't be a very great banker and at the same time what is known as a 'very great lover.' In Europe, where they arrange their lives better, one chooses either banking or 'loving'." He smiled with frank good humor at Pollen; the first time, Mrs. Ennis reflected, he had done

so that night. A suspicion that Burnaby was not altogether ingenuous crossed her mind. But why wasn't he? "You're a man, Pollen," he said; "tell them it's true."

Pollen, absorbed apparently in thoughts of his own, stammered slightly. "Why — why, yes," he agreed hastily.

Mrs. Ennis sighed ruefully and looked at Burnaby with large, humorously reproachful eyes. "You have changed," she observed, "or else you're not saying but half of what you really think — and part of it you don't think at all."

"Oh, yes," laughed Burnaby, "you misunderstand me." He picked up a fork and tapped the table-cloth with it thoughtfully; then he raised his head. "I was thinking of a story I might tell you," he said, "but on second thoughts I don't think I will."

"Don't be foolish!" admonished Mrs. Ennis. "Your stories are always interesting. First finish your dessert."

Pollen smiled languidly. "Yes," he commented, "go on. It's interesting, decidedly. I thought people had given up this sort of conversation long ago."

For the third time Burnaby turned slowly toward him, only now his eyes, instead of resting upon the bland countenance for a fraction of a second, surveyed it lingeringly with the detached, absent-minded stare Mrs. Ennis remembered so well. "Perhaps I will tell it, after all," he said, in the manner of a man who has definitely changed his mind. "Would you like to hear it?" he asked, turning to Mary Rochefort.

"Certainly!" she laughed. "Is it very immoral?"

"Extremely," vouchsafed Burnaby, "from the accepted point of view."

"Tell it in the other room," suggested Mrs. Ennis. "We'll sit before the fire and tell ghost stories."

There was a trace of grimness in Burnaby's answering smile. "Curiously enough, it is a ghost story," he said.

They had arisen to their feet; above the candles their heads and shoulders were indistinct. For a moment Mrs. Ennis hesitated and looked at Burnaby with a new bewilderment in her eyes.

"If it's very immoral," interposed Pollen, "I'm certain to like it."

Burnaby bowed to him with a curious old-fashioned courtesy. "I am sure," he observed, "it will interest you immensely."

Mrs. Ennis suddenly stared through the soft obscurity. "Good gracious," she said to herself, "what is he up to?"

In the little drawing room to which they returned, the jonquils seemed to have received fresh vigor from their hour of loneliness; their shining gold possessed the shadows. Mary Rochefort paused by the open window and peered into the perfumed night. "How ridiculously young the world gets every spring!" she said.

Mrs. Ennis arranged herself before the fire. "Now," she said to Burnaby, "you sit directly opposite. And you" — she indicated Pollen — "sit here. And Mimi, you there. So!" She nodded to Burnaby. "Begin!"

He laughed deprecatingly. "You make it portentous," he objected. "It isn't much of a story; it's — it's really only a parable."

"It's going to be a moral story, after all," interjected Mrs. Ennis triumphantly.

Burnaby chuckled and puffed at his cigarette. "Well," he said finally, "it's about a fellow named Mackintosh."

Pollen, drowsily smoking a cigar, suddenly stirred uneasily.

"Who?" he asked, leaning forward.

"Mackintosh — James Mackintosh! What are you looking for? An ash-tray? Here's one." Burnaby passed it over.

"Thanks!" said Pollen, relaxing. "Yes — go on!"

Burnaby resumed his narrative calmly. "I knew him — Mackintosh, that is — fifteen, no, it was fourteen years ago in Arizona, when I was ranching there, and for the next three years I saw him constantly. He had a place ten miles down the river from me. He was about four years older than I was — a tall, slim, sandy-haired, freckled fellow, preternaturally quiet; a trusty, if there ever was one. Unlike most preternaturally quiet people, however, it wasn't dulness that made him that way;



he wasn't dull a bit. Stir him up on anything and you found that he had thought about it a lot. But he never told me anything about himself until I had known him almost two years, and then it came out quite accidentally one night — we were on a spring round-up — when the two of us were sitting up by the fire, smoking and staring at the desert stars. All the rest were asleep." Burnaby paused. "Is this boring you?" he asked.

"Oh, no!" said Mrs. Ennis; she was watching intently Pollen's half-averted face.

Burnaby threw away his cigarette. "At first," he said, "it seemed to me like the most ordinary of stories—the usual fixed idea that the rejected lover carries around with him for a year or so until he forgets it; the idea that the girl will regret her choice and one day kick over the traces and hunt him up.

"But it wasn't the ordinary story — not by a long shot. You'll see. It seems he had fallen in love with a girl — had been in love with her for years — before he had left the East; a very young girl, nineteen, and of an aspiring family. The family, naturally, didn't look upon him with any favor whatsoever; he was poor and he didn't show the slightest inclination to engage in any of the pursuits they considered proper to the ambitions of a worthy young man. Rather a dreamer, I imagine, until he had found the thing he wanted to do. Not a very impressive figure in the eyes of whitespatted fatherhood. Moreover, he himself was shy about trying to marry a rich girl while she was still so young.

"'She was brought up all wrong,' he said. 'What could you expect? Life will have to teach her. She will have to get over her idea, as one gets over the measles, that money and houses and possessions are the main things.' But he knew she would get over it; he was sure that at the bottom of her heart was a well of honesty and directness. 'Some day,' he said, 'she'll be out here.'

"Apparently the upshot of the matter was that he went to the girl and told her — all these ideas of his; quit, came West; left the road open to the other man. Oh, yes, there was another man, of course; one thoroughly

approved of by the family. Quaint, wasn't it? Perhaps a little overly judicial. But then that was his way. Slow-moving and sure. He saw the girl at dusk in the garden of her family's country place; near a sun-dial, or some other appropriately romantic spot. She kissed him nobly on the forehead, I suppose — the young girl gesture; and told him she wasn't worthy of him and to forget her.

" 'Oh, no, I won't,' he said. 'Not for a minute! And in five years — or ten — you'll come to me. You'll find out.' And then he added something else: 'Whenever things have reached their limit,' he said, 'think of me with all your might. Think hard! There's something in that sort of stuff, you know, where two people love each other. Think hard!' Then he went away."

A log snapped and fell with a soft thud to the ashes beneath. Burnaby was silent for a moment, staring at the fire.

When he spoke again, it was with a slow precision as if he were trying with extreme care to find the right words.

"You see," he said, "he had as an added foundation for his faith — perhaps as the main foundation for it — his knowledge of the other man's character; the character of the man the girl married. It was" — he spoke more hastily and, suddenly raising his head, looked at Mary Rochefort, who, sunk back in her chair, was gazing straight ahead of her — "an especial kind of character. I must dwell on it for a moment, and you must mark well what I say, for on it my parable largely depends. It was a character of the sort that to any but an odalisk means eventual shame; to any woman of pride, you understand, eventually of necessity a broken heart. It was a queer character, but not uncommon. Outwardly very attractive. Mackintosh described it succinctly, shortly, as we sat there by the fire. He spoke between his teeth — the faint wind stirring the desert sand sounded rather like his voice." Burnaby paused again and reached over for a cigarette and lit it deliberately.

"He was a man," he continued, "who apparently had the faculty of making most women love him and, in the

end, the faculty of making all women hate him. I imagine to have known him very well would have been to leave one with a mental shudder such as follows the touching of anguilliform material; snake-like texture. It would leave one ashamed and broken, for fundamentally he was contemptuous of the dignity of personality, particularly of the personalities of women. He was a collector, you understand, a collector of beauty, and women, and incidents — amorous incidents. He carried into his personal relationships the cold objectiveness of the artist. But he wasn't a very great artist, or he wouldn't have done so; he would have had the discrimination to control the artist's greatest peril. It's a flame, this cold objectiveness, but a flame so powerful that it must be properly shaded for intimate use. Otherwise it kills like violet rays. Women wore out their hearts on him, not like waves breaking on a crystal rock, but like rain breaking into a gutter."

"Good Lord!" murmured Mrs. Ennis involuntarily. Burnaby caught her exclamation. "Bad, wasn't it?" he smiled. "But remember I am only repeating what Mackintosh told me. Well, there he was then — Mackintosh — hard at work all day trying to build himself up a ranch, and he was succeeding, too, and, at night, sitting on his porch, smoking and listening to the river, and apparently expecting every moment the girl to appear. It was rather eerie. He had such a convincing way; he was himself so convinced. You half expected yourself to see her come around the corner of the log house in the moonlight. There was about it all the impression that here was something that had a touch of the inevitability of the Greek idea of fate; something more arranged than the usual course of human events. Meanwhile, back in the East, was the girl, learning something about life."

He interrupted himself. "Want a cigarette?" he said to Pollen. "Here they are." He handed over the box. "What is it? A match? Wait a moment; I'll strike it for you. Keep the end of the thing steady, will you? All right." He resumed the thread of his narrative.

"In four years she had learned a lot," he said; "she



had become apparently almost a woman. On a certain hot evening in July — about seven o'clock, I imagine — she became one entirely; at least, for the moment, and, at least, her sort of woman. I am not defending what she did, remember; I am simply saying that she did it.

"It was very hot; even now when dusk was approaching. The girl had been feeling rather ill all day; feverish. She had not been able to get away to her country place as yet. Into the semidarkness of the room where she was came her husband. That night she had determined, as women will, upon a final test. She knew where he expected to dine; she asked him if he would dine with her.

"'I can't,' he said. 'I'm sorry——'

"Possibly nothing immediate would have happened had he not added an unspeakable flourish to his portrait. He reached out his arms and drew the girl to him and tried to kiss her condescendingly; but I suppose his hands found her, in her clinging gown, soft to their touch. At all events, they tightened upon her in an unmistakable way. She pulled herself away. 'Let me pass!' she said. 'You — you — !' — she could think of no words to suit him. You see, she understood him completely, now. He was a collector, but a collector so despicable that he was even unwilling to trade one article for another. He wanted to keep on his shelves, as it were, all the accumulation of his life, and take down from time to time whatever part of it suited his sudden fancy.

"The girl went up to her own room, and very carefully, not knowing precisely what she did, changed into a black street dress and removed all marks of identification. Her eyes swam with feverishness. While she was dressing, she bathed in hot water her arms where her husband's hands had been. She concluded that it was not what he had done — had constantly done — but what he was that made life unbearable. When she was through she went downstairs, and out of the front door, and walked slowly toward the center of the town and the railway station."

"And is that all?" asked Mary Rochefort, after a while.

"Oh, no," said Burnaby; "it's only the beginning.



Mackintosh was in the hills beyond his ranch, hunting horses. He was camped in a little valley by himself. On this particular day he had been out since sun-up and did not get back until just about dusk. He picketed the horse he had been riding, and built a small fire, and began to cook his supper. All around him, brooding and unreal, was the light you get in high mountain places. The fire shone like a tiny ruby set in topaz. Mackintosh raised his head and saw a woman coming out of the spur of aspen trees across the creek from him. He wasn't surprised; he knew right away who it was; he knew it was the girl. He watched her for a moment, and then he went over to her, and took her hand, and led her to the fire. They didn't speak at all."

"And you mean," asked Mrs. Ennis, "that she did that? That she came all the way out to him, like that?"

"No," retorted Burnaby, "of course not. How could she? She wasn't even sure where he was living. At the moment she was in a hospital out of her head. You see, I didn't know whether to believe Mackintosh or not when he said he saw her that night, although I am sure he believed he did — such things are beyond human proof — but what I do know is that he came straight down from the hills, and boarded a train, and went East, and found the girl, and, after a while, came back with her." He looked at the fire. "They were the most completely happy people I have ever seen," he continued. "They were so calm and determined about themselves. Everything immaterial had been burned away. They knew they were playing on the side of fate. And so," he concluded, "that's the end of my parable. What do you make of it?"

The curtains, stirred by the breeze, tip-tapped softly; in the silence the fire hissed gently. Pollen spoke first, but with some difficulty, as if in the long period of listening on his part his throat had become dry. "It's very interesting," he said; "very! But what's it all about? And you certainly don't believe it, do you?"

"Of course I do," answered Burnaby calmly. "You should, too; it's true."

Mary Rochefort looked up with an exclamation.

"Gracious!" she said. "I had no idea it was so late! My motor must be waiting." She got to her feet. She looked very white and her eyes were tired; the translucent quality of the earlier hours was gone. "I'm worn out," she explained. "I've been going about too much. I must rest." She held her hand out to Mrs. Ennis; over her shoulder she spoke to Pollen. "No," she said. "Don't bother. I'll take myself home, thanks."

"I'll see you to your car," he stammered.

She turned to Burnaby. "Good night!" she said. Her voice was lifeless, disinterested; her eyes met his for an instant and were withdrawn.

"Good night," he said.

Mrs. Ennis stood by the door for a moment before she walked slowly back to the fireplace. From the street outside came the whirring of a motor and the sound of Mary Rochefort's voice saying good-by to Pollen.

Mrs. Ennis rested an arm on the mantelpiece and kicked a log thoughtfully with a white-slippered foot; then she faced about on Burnaby.

"I suppose," she said, "you realize that you have spoiled my party?"

"I?" said Burnaby.

"Yes, you!" Her small, charming face was a study in ruefulness, and indecision whether to be angry or not, and, one might almost have imagined, a certain amused tenderness as well. "Don't you suppose those people knew of whom you were talking?"

Burnaby, peering down at her, narrowed his eyes and then opened them very wide. "They couldn't very well have helped it," he said, "could they? For, you see"—he paused—"the girl who came West was Mrs. Pollen."

Mrs. Ennis gasped in the manner of a person who is hearing too much. "Mrs. Pollen?"

"Yes. You knew he had been divorced, didn't you? Years ago."

"I'd heard it, but forgotten." Mrs. Ennis clasped her jeweled hand. "And you dared," she demanded, "to tell his story before him in that way?"

"Why not? It was rather a complete revenge upon

him of fate, wasn't it? You see, he couldn't very well give himself away, could he? His one chance was to keep quiet." Burnaby paused and smiled doubtfully at Mrs. Ennis. "I hope I made his character clear enough," he said. "That, after all, was the point of the story."

"How did you know it was this Pollen?" she asked, "and how, anyway, would Mary Rochefort know of whom you were talking?"

Burnaby grinned. "I took a chance," he said. "And as to the second, I told Madame de Rochefort at dinner — merely as a coincidence; at least, I let her think so — that I had once known in the West a Mrs. Pollen with a curious history. Perhaps I wouldn't have told it if Pollen hadn't been so witty." He picked up a silver dish from the mantelpiece and examined it carefully.

"One oughtn't to have such a curious name if one is going to lead a curious life, ought one?" he asked. He sighed. "You're right," he concluded; "your friend Mary Rochefort is a child."

Mrs. Ennis looked up at him with searching eyes.

"Why don't you stay longer in Washington?" she asked softly. "Just now, of course, Mary Rochefort hates you; but she won't for long — I think she was beginning to have doubts about Pollen, anyway."

Burnaby suddenly looked grave and disconcerted. "Oh, no!" he said, hastily. "Oh, no! I must be off tomorrow." He laughed. "My dear Rhoda," he said, "you have the quaintest ideas. I don't like philandering; I'm afraid I have a crude habit of really falling in love."

Mrs. Ennis's own eyes were veiled. "If you're going away so soon, sit down," she said, "and stay. You needn't go — oh, for hours!"

"I must," he answered. "I'm off so early."

She sighed. "For years?"

"One — perhaps two." His voice became gay and bantering again. "My dear Rhoda," he said, "I'm extremely sorry if I really spoiled your party, but I don't believe I did — not altogether, anyhow. Underneath, I think you enjoyed it." He took her small hand in his; he wondered why it was so cold and listless.

At the door leading into the hall he paused and looked back. "Oh," he said, "there was one thing I forgot to tell you! You see, part of my story wasn't altogether true. Mrs. Pollen — or rather, Mrs. Mackintosh — left Mackintosh after five years or so. She's in the movies — doing very well, I understand. She would; wouldn't she? Of course, she was no good to begin with. But that didn't spoil the point of my story, did it? Good-by, Rhoda, my dear." He was gone.

Mrs. Ennis did not move until she heard the street door close; she waited even a little longer, following the sound of Burnaby's footsteps as they died away into the night; finally she walked over to the piano, and, sitting down, raised her hands as if to strike the keys. Instead, she suddenly put both her arms on the little shelf before the music-rack and buried her head in them. The curtains tip-tapped on the window-sill; the room was entirely quiet.